

Nanã: The Afro-Brazilian Primordial Grandmother and the Sacred Science of Sacred Mud

By Orisha University Faculty · Buddha University Press

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Before there was fire, before there were rivers carving their paths through open land, Yoruba and Afro-Brazilian cosmology holds that there was mud — the primordial, undifferentiated substance from which the earth itself was formed. The orisha who presides over this substance, and who is honored in Brazil as the eldest of all orishas, is Nanã (also written Nana or Nana Buruku). Where younger orishas govern rivers, oceans, thunder, or the hunt, Nanã governs something more fundamental and more solemn: the swamp, the primordial mud, and the two great boundary-thresholds of human existence — birth and death. To study Nanã is to study the sacred science of origins and endings, the beginning and the closing of every circle.

History and Origins: The Grandmother Before the Pantheon

Yoruba oral tradition consistently places Nanã (Yoruba: Nana Buruku) among the very oldest orishas — in many tellings, she predates even Obatala and Oduduwa, existing at a stage of creation when the world itself was still forming from primordial swamp and mud. Some traditions describe her as the mother or grandmother of several major orishas, including Omolu (also called Obaluaiye) and, in certain regional traditions, Oxumare, making her a genuine matriarchal figure at the root of the entire orisha family tree rather than merely one deity among equals.

Some oral historians and comparative religion scholars trace the name Buruku itself to a broader West African pattern of naming primordial or "dangerous" deities with terms that later colonial missionaries mistranslated as demonic — a mistranslation that unfortunately persists in some popular but inaccurate accounts of Yoruba religion. Properly understood, "Buruku" carries connotations of raw, untamed, foundational power rather than evil; Nanã's power is the power of unshaped material reality itself, neither good nor bad in a simplistic moral sense, but foundational to everything that follows. This is a crucial corrective that Orisha University emphasizes in its coursework, since much of the earliest European ethnographic writing on Yoruba religion was produced by missionaries actively hostile to the tradition they were documenting, and their mistranslations have proven remarkably durable in popular culture even a century later.

This deep antiquity carried directly into Brazil through Candomblé, where Nanã retained her status as an elder orisha commanding particular reverence and, notably, a slower, more restrained possession-trance style than younger, more energetic orishas. Enslaved Yoruba and related ethnic groups transported to Brazil preserved her worship under the colonial-era Catholic mask most commonly of Saint Anne (Sant'Ana), the grandmother of Jesus in Catholic tradition — a syncretism whose logic is immediately apparent: both figures represent an elder maternal authority standing at the root of a sacred lineage. This same layered survival strategy shaped the worship of her descendants, including [Omolu: The Afro-Brazilian Orisha of Sickness, Skin, and the Sacred Science of Healing](/blog/omolu-the-afro-brazilian-orisha-of-sickness-skin-and-the-sacred-science-of-healing-1787659751094), whose own domain of illness and healing directly inherits Nanã's authority over the boundary between life and death.

Spiritual Significance: Mud, Mortality, and the Two Great Thresholds

Nanã's domain, the swamp and primordial mud (amo), is significant precisely because mud sits at the boundary between water and earth, between the fluid and the solid — a liminal substance appropriate to an orisha who herself governs liminal thresholds. In Yoruba and Afro-Brazilian cosmology, Nanã is intimately associated with both birth (the formation of the human body, which some traditions hold she shapes from clay, a role closely related to but distinct from Obatala's more commonly cited creation of human form) and death (the return of the body to the earth from which it came).

This dual association makes Nanã one of the more solemn and, to newcomers, initially intimidating orishas in the pantheon — but Candomblé practitioners are careful to emphasize that her domain over death is not malevolent. Nanã does not cause death arbitrarily; she receives it, presides over its dignity, and ensures the proper closing of a life's circle. She is deeply associated with elderly wisdom, ancestral memory, and the accumulated knowledge that only advanced age can provide — a counterpoint to the youthful vigor of orishas like Oxossi or Iansã. Her sacred color is typically lilac, deep purple, or white, and her ritual implement, the ibiri, is a distinctive broom-like or cross-like sacred object woven from straw, unlike any other orisha's symbolic tool, representing her unique and ancient authority.

There is also a striking parallel between Nanã's mud and the broader Yoruba creation narrative in which Obatala is said to have shaped the first human beings from clay under Olodumare's direction. Some regional oral traditions hold that it was Nanã's swamp-mud, not a separate clay source, that provided the very material Obatala worked with — meaning that even the sky-father orisha most associated with human creation ultimately depended on Nanã's primordial substance to do his work. This detail is frequently overlooked in simplified retellings of Yoruba cosmology but is essential to understanding why elder practitioners insist Nanã be given first respect (before, in fact, before any younger orisha) in certain ceremonial contexts — not because she is more powerful in an active sense, but because everything else, quite literally, was built from what she alone provided.

Ritual and Practical Teachings: Approaching the Eldest With Respect

Initiation into Nanã's worship follows the same core Candomblé initiatory structure as other orishas — seclusion, ritual preparation, and the cultivation of axé within the initiate's body — but with distinctive emphasis on slowness, restraint, and deep respect for elders, both spiritual and literal. Devotees of Nanã are often counseled to develop patience with process, particularly the slow, sometimes uncomfortable processes of aging, illness, and eventual death that Western culture frequently seeks to avoid discussing altogether.

Because of her association with the swamp and stagnant water, ritual offerings to Nanã are notably different from those given to river or ocean orishas: rather than clear, flowing water, she receives offerings placed at the edge of marshes, or on dry land near still water, reflecting the mud's intermediate, non-flowing nature. Common offerings include white foods, particularly those without salt or strong seasoning, echoing the plain, unadorned character appropriate to the primordial substance she governs. Devotees are also taught specific protocols for eldercare and end-of-life ritual, since Nanã's domain directly informs Candomblé funerary practice (axexê), the elaborate ceremony conducted to properly release a deceased initiate's orisha energy and guide their spirit toward ancestral rest.

Beyond formal terreiro ritual, everyday devotion to Nanã often centers on the practice of listening — quite literally, sitting with and attending to the wisdom of living elders before that knowledge is lost. Many Candomblé communities formally task younger devotees of Nanã with documenting oral histories, learning songs and liturgical Yoruba phrases directly from the oldest surviving members of the terreiro, and understanding this transmission work itself as a form of religious devotion rather than a merely cultural or academic exercise. In a rapidly modernizing Brazil, where younger generations increasingly move to cities and away from traditional community structures, this elder-transmission practice associated with Nanã has taken on renewed urgency, mirroring concerns familiar to indigenous and traditional communities worldwide about the irreversible loss of knowledge when it is not deliberately, patiently passed down.

Ese Ifa and Owe: The Proverbs of the Eldest

Yoruba proverbial tradition holds Nanã in particular reverence as a figure whose age commands automatic authority. One widely cited owe teaches: *"Bi a ba n bo Naa, a o gbodo yara,"* roughly rendered as "One who honors Nanã must not be in a hurry" — a direct statement of the patience and unhurried respect her worship demands, in sharp contrast to the more urgent energy surrounding younger orishas.

Another teaching frequently invoked in relation to Nanã holds: *"Agba ti ko lakaye, omode ni,"* — "An elder without wisdom is merely a child," a proverb that captures the Yoruba cultural principle that age alone does not confer wisdom; wisdom must be earned through lived experience and properly transmitted to the next generation. This teaching is central to why Nanã is venerated not simply as "old" but as the embodiment of hard-won ancestral knowledge — precisely the kind of knowledge Orisha University seeks to preserve and transmit academically rather than let dissolve with each passing generation of tradition-bearers, a concern shared by scholars studying [Nana Buruku: The Primordial Grandmother of Ifa and Yoruba Sacred Science](/blog/nana-buruku-the-primordial-grandmother-of-ifa-and-yoruba-sacred-science-1785744182334) on the West African side of her worship.

Comparative Context: Nanã Among the Orishas of Life's Great Circle

Nanã's place within the broader pantheon is best understood through her direct relationships with several other orishas covered elsewhere in Orisha University's curriculum. Her son (in most Brazilian traditions), [Omolu: The Afro-Brazilian Orisha of Sickness, Skin, and the Sacred Science of Healing](/blog/omolu-the-afro-brazilian-orisha-of-sickness-skin-and-the-sacred-science-of-healing-1787659751094), inherits her authority over illness and mortality but applies it specifically to the process of healing and epidemic disease — Nanã governs the fact of mortality itself, while Omolu governs humanity's ongoing struggle against premature death through sickness.

Her relationship with [Oxala: The Great Father of Purity, Patience, and the White Cloth of Creation](/blog/oxala-the-great-father-of-purity-patience-and-the-white-cloth-of-creation-1787141181127) is equally significant. As two of the eldest and most restrained orishas in the entire pantheon, Nanã and Oxala are frequently discussed together as complementary elder figures — Oxala representing purity, patience, and the calm authority of the sky-father, and Nanã representing the equally patient but earth-and-water-rooted authority of the primordial grandmother. Together they model an elder wisdom that stands apart from the more dynamic, youthful energies of orishas like Iemanjá or Oxossi. Indeed, [Iemanjá: The Ocean Mother of Brazil and the Sacred Science of Boundless Love](/blog/iemanja-the-ocean-mother-of-brazil-and-the-sacred-science-of-boundless-love-1787141184351) is sometimes described in Candomblé cosmology as a later, more dynamic evolution of the maternal principle that Nanã first embodied in the primordial swamp — the same essential maternal *axé*, expressed at different stages of the world's unfolding.

This progression — from Nanã's still, primordial mud to Iemanjá's vast, moving ocean — offers Orisha University students a useful teaching model for understanding orisha cosmology as a whole: it is not a flat catalog of unrelated deities but a layered, developmental system in which later, more differentiated forces (rivers, oceans, thunder, the hunt) all trace their ultimate origin back to more fundamental, undifferentiated ones. Approaching the pantheon this way — genealogically, rather than as an arbitrary list — is one of the central methodological commitments of serious academic Ifa & Orisha Sciences study, distinguishing it sharply from the superficial, decontextualized treatments of "orisha symbolism" common in popular non-academic sources.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is Nanã the same as Nana Buruku?

Yes. Nanã is the Brazilian Portuguese rendering of the Yoruba orisha known as Nana Buruku. The core identity — the primordial eldest orisha governing mud, birth, and death — is the same figure,

though Brazilian Candomblé developed distinct liturgical songs, offerings, and syncretic Catholic associations not present in the West African tradition.

Why is Nanã associated with Saint Anne in Catholic syncretism?

Saint Anne is venerated in Catholic tradition as the grandmother of Jesus and mother of Mary, an elder maternal authority standing at the root of a sacred lineage — a role that closely paralleled Nanã's own status as grandmother-figure at the root of the orisha pantheon, making the syncretic pairing a natural fit during the colonial period when African religious practice was forcibly hidden.

Is Nanã a dangerous or feared orisha?

Nanã is approached with deep respect and solemnity rather than fear. While her domain includes death, Candomblé practitioners emphasize that she does not cause death arbitrarily or maliciously; she presides over its dignity and proper conclusion, much as an elder in any community holds authority over funerary rites without being feared for causing the deaths themselves.

What is the ibiri and why is it unique to Nanã?

The ibiri is Nanã's distinctive ritual implement, a broom-like or cross-shaped object woven from straw and cowrie shells, unlike the tools associated with any other orisha. It symbolizes her unique primordial authority and is used in ceremonies specific to her worship, including funerary rites.

Can someone be initiated to Nanã even if they are young?

Yes. As with other orishas, initiation is determined through divination based on a person's spiritual head (ori), not their physical age. A young initiate claimed by Nanã is understood to carry an "old soul" temperament — patience, reflectiveness, and an unusual comfort with themes of mortality — regardless of their chronological age.

Does Nanã have a specific season or day of celebration?

Nanã's principal feast day in the Brazilian Candomblé calendar typically falls on July 26th, aligned with the Catholic feast of Saint Anne under the historical syncretism, though the specific date and the scale of celebration can vary between individual terreiros and regional traditions across Bahia, Rio de Janeiro, and beyond.

What can Nanã teach someone outside Candomblé about approaching death?

Nanã's teachings offer a rare cultural framework that neither denies nor sensationalizes death, but treats it as a dignified, natural closing of a sacred circle that began with birth — a perspective increasingly recognized by scholars of comparative religion as offering valuable insight for modern end-of-life care and grief processing.

Continue Your Study of the Orishas

Nanã's mud is the substance from which everything else in the orisha pantheon eventually took form — a reminder that beginnings and endings are never opposites, but two faces of the same sacred circle. Studying her teachings with the depth and seriousness they deserve requires more than casual curiosity; it requires structured, disciplined academic engagement with a living tradition.

Orisha University exists to provide exactly that structure, and is proudly endorsed by the Araba Agbaye of Ile-Ife, Nigeria, the highest living traditional authority in Ifa practice. Through our Bachelor of Ifa & Orisha Sciences (B.I.O.S.), Master of Ifa & Orisha Sciences (M.I.O.S.), and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Ifa & Orisha Sciences programs, students engage directly with elder orishas like Nanã alongside the full breadth of Yoruba and Afro-Brazilian sacred science.

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